

A World Just For Us

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A World Just For Us by itsmikehanlon

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Summary:

Slowly, inexplicably, they're drawn back together again.

1. First Day of School

Author's Note:

So this takes place a couple of years after the movie (Mike's going into grade eleven) and it draws from the movie for the most part. The biggest change is I'm using Mike's story from the book because he got done so dirty in the movie man. For those of you who haven't read the book, Mike's parents (esp. his dad) were great. This takes place after his dad died of cancer. Excuse my writing, I'm a little rusty since it's been a while, but I just need the Losers Club to be happy. I also want to get this straight right at the beginning; none of them are going to die. Yes, including those two.

Dear Dad,

This past summer has been hard without you here; I'm not going to lie. Mom and I have been struggling to keep the farm going and we can't really afford hired hands after the medical bills we had to pay. Still, we've kept on and I'm happy to say that I think the farm will be fine for another year. Our crops are doing well and we should be able to sell a lot come fall harvest. Mom says you'd be proud of us.

Beyond that change, the other big one that's happening is that I'm going to be starting school this year. I know, I know, those teachers will never be able to give me lessons better than the ones you two can give me, but I really want to give Mom a break. Underneath all her optimism about how the farm's going to be and how you're smiling down at us, I think she's really tired. Sometimes I hear her crying at night when she thinks no one is listening and I can barely stand it.

If I join school I told her she should join the PTA since she's great at organizing lessons and coming up with cool historical trips. That way she'll get a break from teaching but maybe she can make some friends. Even though I'm fine with it just being the two of us, it feels like our loneliness plays off each other at times. She—we both, I guess—could use some human contact with people who aren't grieving.

It'll be hard to make friends since everyone's known each other forever and I'm kind of an outcast... I'll try, though! I don't know why, but I feel like there are some really great kids out there that I could get along with. Sometimes I even have dreams that I'm hanging out with this group. We explore sewers together, laugh, cry, joke around... It's kind of weird. It's like I'm missing people I don't even know. Does that make sense? Maybe I'm just going crazy. Either way, school starts tomorrow, for better or for worse. I'll write you again to tell you how it went.

I miss you.

-Mike

Mike Hanlon had known Derry was one of those small towns where almost everyone knew everyone, but he hadn't realized just what kind of effect that would have on the high school population. Granted, he'd never been to high school before—or even elementary school—but from what he'd heard and seen on the few television channels his TV had, it shouldn't be *quite* so intimidating.

From the second his mother had pulled up to let him out near the bus-loading zone, he'd attracted stares. Not just a few either; everyone was staring at him and most of the faces weren't friendly. He couldn't decide whether it was the race thing or the new kid thing or a bit of both, but by the time he walked through the doors and into the hallway he was already exhausted of the place. If he hadn't been doing this mostly for his mom, he would've turned around and left already.

"Isn't that the farmer's kid?" "Oh yeah, he was homeschooled." "Is he retarded or something?" "—first black kid we've had in a long—" "—father died—"

Mike hunched his shoulders, sighing internally. He hadn't known

how interested people would be in him, but he knew how cruel kids were. He had dim memories of Henry Bowers shoving him around for no good reason and prominent memories of people snickering about him wobbling down the road on his bike with a couple of bags of feed on one shoulder. Did it bother him? Not as much as one might think, not anymore. Though the comment about his father still stung.

He was trying to decide if the best place to wait out the time until the bell rang was the bathroom or an empty classroom when a loud, excited voice made him pause. It wasn't just the fact that this kid was one of the few not talking about him, or that the kid was talking loud enough to cut across nearly the whole hall. It was something about the quality of the voice. Familiar in the way a daydream you'd just forgotten was.

"—and then she was like, 'Oh my *God*, I've never seen one that big. Won't it hurt?' And I was like, 'Why don't you hop on and see?'"

The crowd of kids around the speaker burst into laughter, though most of them looked sceptical. Mike was glad he hadn't caught the first part of that although he could pretty much guess what the kid had been talking about.

"You're such a liar, Tozier," one of the girls in the crowd giggled, and there was an inherent meanness in that giggle that suggested she was laughing *at* him instead of with him. "First of all, no girl would ever want you. Second of all, Bradley Donovan's seen you naked during gym and he says you're way below average." The crowd laughed even harder at that and Mike shifted uncomfortably, feeling bad for the kid. The kid didn't seem to feel bad for himself though; he only grinned wider.

"He wot, mate?" the kid asked, horribly butchering a British accent. "Are you sayin' young Donovan was lookin' at me cock? A fuckin' creep, that one is, I'll tell ya! We gents are s'posed to be meetin' eyes in the bathroom, not lookin' down at appendages that best be left not looked at. How rude, good sir, how motherfuckin' rude!"

There was a murmur of sighs amongst the crowd as if they were fed up with the kid's antics and then they all dispersed into their separate groups, giving Mike a good look at the speaker for the first time.

Something in his heart lurched at the combined sight of dark curls, eyes that looked huge behind taped up glasses, and mouth pulled into a sly grin. He didn't quite understand the feeling but before he could puzzle it through a single word left his mouth and managed to confuse him even more.

"Trashmouth?"

The kid's eyes flickered to Mike's face and his lips dropped in a perfect O of surprise. There was a flash of recognition that was just as quickly replaced with confusion as the kid looked Mike up and down. He had no idea how long they stared each other with mirrored expressions of furrowed brows and searching eyes, but the moment was broken when someone bumped into Mike from behind and made him stumble a few steps.

"Aw, Richie's found himself a boyfriend," some kid taunted, and the other kid—Richie—snapped out of his daze to flip the bully the bird. Mike shook his head, reaching up to press a finger against his temple and wondering why it had felt like something had broken free in his head. Like there was something floating around in there just waiting to land and mess him up. For a brief second he heard a voice that sounded suspiciously like a young Richie saying something about killing a fucking clown. Then it was gone and all he was left with was a mild headache.

"God, the kids in this school are assholes sometimes," Richie muttered out of the corner of his mouth to Mike. "You're new but I betcha you noticed already, didn't you? Of course you did. No offense, but you stick out like a sore thumb."

"None taken," Mike sighed; it was true. There were so many things that made him stick out that he wondered if he'd ever be accepted at all. He would've said so if it wouldn't have sounded whiny and self-pitying. He found that he kind of wanted to make a good impression on Richie despite the fact that he'd just blurted out some sort of insult by accident. "And listen, about what I called you—"

"Yeah, my nickname. How'd you know?" Richie asked, barely glancing up as the bell rang. Students flowed past them like a stream and Mike wanted to join them, but somehow he felt like this was

more important. He'd come here to make friends, hadn't he? He hadn't known Richie long enough to form a solid opinion but the kid wasn't treating him like a leper or laughing at him. Man, his standards for a friend were low.

"Would you believe me if I said it just kind of popped out?" Mike asked, cringing. It was a piss poor excuse but he didn't want to start off what could be a budding friendship with a lie. If his being weird didn't totally ruin his chance of Richie ever wanting to interact with him.

Richie seemed to mull this over like it was a serious question, then shrugged after a moment. "Yeah, I'd believe that. God knows weirder shit happens around here. You can call me Trashmouth if you want but if you'd prefer something else, my name is Richie Tozier. Nice to meet you."

"Mike Hanlon. Nice to meet you, Richie." They shook hands and again Mike was struck with the oddest feeling that there was something familiar about it. "So, uh... you got any idea where AP Math with a Mrs. Albrecht is?"

"Man, that's where I'm heading!" Richie's grin increased sevenfold and he slung an arm around Mike's shoulder, heedless of the few people remaining in the hall who looked disgusted. "It's fate. We're meant to be friends. What do you say?"

Mike would've hugged him if it wouldn't have been super weird, that's how incredibly pleased he was with this development. He hadn't even expected to get a friend within the first month, let alone on the first day. His smile was wide enough to split his face as he nodded, and Richie whooped like it was the most exciting thing he'd ever heard.

Alright, maybe the year wouldn't be so bad after all. Mike couldn't wait to write to his father.

The rest of the day went by with that blur Richie said all first days of school have. He had one other class with Richie after lunch but the

kid confidently led him to every place he needed to go, declaring that 'being on time is overrated, anyway.' They spent their classes whispering together instead of listening to the rules and plan for the year, which Richie laughed at. "It always goes down the shitter, those due dates mean nothing," he claimed, and Mike had no experience to argue otherwise.

Richie did most of the talking; barely ever taking a breath as if he was bursting with information that he just *had* to share. Mike learned that most of the kids would stop staring after two days, that he shouldn't go to the boys' bathroom at any point in time, that the best place to smoke was the big oak tree just off school property, and that there was one other new kid besides him this year. A girl who had apparently used to go to school with Richie but he couldn't really remember her. He learned what stairways not to take, what tables not to sit at in the cafeteria (he sat at a mostly empty round table near the garbage with Richie), which students not to talk to. By the end of the day his head was spinning with all the new information.

"You'll have it down by the end of the first week," Richie told him when they burst through the doors and out into the fresh air that still smelled faintly of summer. Richie was walking backwards down the entrance steps, a cigarette dangling from his lips from who knew where. Richie wasn't the most popular person around but he seemed to be generally tolerated, and now that him and Mike were hanging out people weren't whispering as much. He was no longer easy prey, all alone for people to snicker at without reproach. When someone had pointed him out in the hallway just before they'd gotten outside, Richie had turned to them with huge eyes and said, "I *know*. He's totally hot, right?" and the girls had turned so red Mike had laughed.

"I don't know. There's a lot to memorize," Mike replied hesitantly now, already trying to remember half of it. At least the school work itself was easy. His parents had taught him at way higher levels so that part would be a breeze.

"You're a kid, you'll get a feel for it. It's ingrained deep into you, whether you like it or not," Richie joked, reaching up to pinch his cigarette as he took a long drag. He was enjoying the smoking so much that he didn't even notice Mike's eyes go wide and before Mike could call out he'd already crashed into another kid behind him,

sending the boy tumbling off the last step and face-first onto the ground.

“Oh shit,” Richie gasped as he swung his arms for balance, and Mike grabbed his shirt to steady him while looking with concern at the kid who was now lying on the pavement and not moving.

“Hey, are you alright?” Mike asked, letting Richie go the second he was steady to spring down the last few steps and crouch beside the kid.

“Richie *fucking* Tozier,” the most furious voice Mike had ever heard growled into the cement. Mike took a step back, glancing uncertainly at Richie, who had frozen in shock. Richie started backing up, shaking his head at Mike, and a second later the tiny kid was on his feet, spinning around and levelling a glare so angry at Mike’s friend that he honestly thought he’d have to break up a fight. “First you get my anti-smoking club shut down, and now you shove me down the stairs. I hope you’re pleased with yourself, you grade A asshole.”

“O-oh,” Richie got out, putting both hands up and smiling a little as if to put the tiny boy at ease. “That was your club? I honestly wouldn’t have done it if I would’ve known, Eds.”

The nickname brought back such a wave of nostalgia that Mike missed the next part of exchange and the next thing he knew, the small teen had rounded on him. Mike almost put his hands up the same way Richie did; he would’ve if the kid hadn’t tilted his head for a second like he was looking at someone he couldn’t quite place.

“You—” the boy began, head snapping back straight as if he didn’t like having bad posture. “...Thanks for seeing if I was alright. You seem okay. You can do so much better than *him*.”

“Eds, I’m sor—”

“*Don’t* talk to me. And don’t you dare call me that.” The kid sniffed loudly with such a sour look it could’ve curdled milk, then dug around in a fanny pack Mike hadn’t noticed, pulling out wet wipes to pat the dirt from his face. He looked relatively unharmed at least, which was good because his mom would... Mike scrunched up his

face, feeling slightly disconnected from reality. His mom would what? He didn't even know this kid's name, let alone anything about his mother.

"I'm Mike. Nice to meet you." It was the only thing he could think of to try and defuse the situation, because now there was a glint in Richie's eyes that made him nervous.

"Eddie," the boy said with a curt nod, though he didn't offer his hand. Mike kind of hadn't expected him to in the first place. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have somewhere else to be. Somewhere that doesn't involve your existence." This said pointedly at Richie, who opened his mouth to say something and then shut it with a click when Mike elbowed him in the side. Eddie lifted one hand to give Mike a small wave that was almost friendly, then turned away and left without acknowledging Richie again.

"He's adorable isn't he?" Richie sighed with a small smile. Mike waited for the punch line to whatever joke he assumed Richie was making but it never came. Richie only watched the kid with a goofy expression that made Mike wonder if his new friend was all there.

"Adorable isn't quite the word I'd used to describe him. Maybe... feisty? Small and angry? Fiery?" Still, for some reason he couldn't quite understand he thought that it wouldn't be so bad if they ran into Eddie again. Not literally, of course, but if they met up again and Eddie wanted to hang out, he'd be okay with it. Though he doubted Eddie would be okay hanging out while Richie was there. "What'd you *do* to him anyway? He looked about ready to tear you in two."

"To be honest, I'm not sure." Richie was uncharacteristically serious now as he stubbed out his cigarette without thought and began to walk. "We went to middle school together but I don't really remember interacting much with him. I think I noticed him? Maybe not. I just know that when we got to high school he was always glaring at me for some reason. Naturally I tried to ask him why the animosity—I may have suggested he was staring for some, uh, not PG-rated reasons—and since then he'll barely even look at me, let alone talk. I think those are the most words he's said to me since high school started."

“But you like messing with him.” It wasn’t a question; the nickname and the glint in Richie’s eyes made that very clear.

“Yup. What can I say? He’s cute when he gets all riled up.”

Mike didn’t know what to say at that. He wanted to say that maybe Eddie would be nicer if Richie stopped bothering him, but it felt right somehow. Richie teasing and Eddie snapping back. The only part of the equation that felt wrong was the fact that they were acquaintances rather than friends.

“Who does he hang out with?” Mike asked, as they got to the curb of the bus loading zone. He scanned the lot but his mother wasn’t there yet, so he turned and gave Richie his full attention.

“Eds? Uh... no one, really.” Richie shrugged as he took another cigarette out, waving to a girl getting on a bus and smirking when she turned away in disgust. “He has this thing about germs so he’s very picky when it comes to who goes near him. Especially when it comes to smokers. I heard he has asthma or something? I dunno.”

“We should ask him to sit with us at lunch tomorrow.”

Richie stopped searching the crowd and turned to Mike, letting out the most delighted, dumbfounded laugh Mike had ever heard. “Really? He’s gonna say no. You may as well ask Stan Uris to sit with us.”

“Stan Uris?” That name sounded familiar, too. Mike was sure he hadn’t met anyone with that name during the day but it was familiar regardless.

“Oh god. Stan hates me more than Eds does, I think. He pretends I don’t exist. When he gets a hate on for someone it’s brutal. There are a few other kids he ignores too. Stuttering Bill, some shy kid who’s built like a football player, the new girl... You’d better watch out in case he starts hating you too.”

Mike’s mind was running too fast for him to catch up, images of birds and coke bottles and sewer water and bruises flooding into him so fast he gasped. He was sure that if he dived into those images then

something would be revealed, and he would've if his mother hadn't chosen that exact moment to pull up to the sidewalk.

"Mike, you ready?" she called, and Richie slapped him heartily on the back to snap him out of his thoughts. They were gone just like that, leaving him with tingling palms and a lingering fear of some vague, unformed creature lurking in his memories. Something from a nightmare, probably.

"Yeah!" he called back, turning to Richie. His friend held out a hand for a high five, and when he went to slap it Richie danced away with a 'Too slow!' Mike rolled his eyes but he was grinning and Richie was too, and everything felt okay in that moment. Without so much as a goodbye—it seemed they didn't really need one, since they'd see each other soon—Mike got into the car and turned his expression to his mother. Her own exhausted expression morphed into one of tired happiness as she reached out and ruffled his hair, and for the rest of the ride home he told her about his new friend and how he thought he might make another one in the near future.

"They sound *right*," was her input, and for the first time since his dad had passed, things were beginning to look up.

That night, sitting down to write in the journal he'd bought for letters to his father, he noticed something odd. He'd already told his dad about Richie and was starting in about Eddie when he noticed it. He slowly set the pen down, narrowing his eyes curiously as he turned his palm upwards. It should've been impossible. Logically it was, for something like this to just appear out of nowhere, but Mike wasn't Stan so he didn't question the laws of nature when it appeared. He wondered why he'd thought about Stan. Then he wondered why he wasn't more freaked out.

Finally, he wondered where exactly the faded, silvery scar on his palm had come from, and if it was a signal that something big was about to happen.

2. Stray Cats

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh my god guys thank you so much, your comments clear my skin and make Mike's crops grow. Sorry this took a bit to get done, I have.... self control issues and didn't mean for it to be quite so long. Also, I finally got to move this off my dead account onto a new one I made for It so I'll be answering comments from now on!!!! But woah seriously thanks, you guys rock.

Mike got up before the sun did to do his chores the next morning, easing quietly out of bed so as not to wake his mom up. Getting up somewhat early had become routine, but with school starting at a time that cut into his chores he had to wake up at three in the morning to get everything done. It made him so exhausted he could barely see for the first hour, but he didn't want his mom taking it all on and besides, his dad had been able to run everything with no problems. It was Mike's duty to look after the farm and his mother now.

After doing a walk around the pasture fields to make sure there were no recent holes in the fence or more stray cats dropped off (for some reason their farm was a popular cat-drop place), he went to the barn to herd the cows and sheep into their respective fields. Then he put soft country music on the radio and spent the next couple of hours mucking out stalls.

The months following his father's passing had been hard emotionally and physically, though Mike had kept as strong as he could for his mom. Emotionally he'd figured he'd done an okay job, but physically he'd nearly died mucking out every stall. It had taken him almost six hours the first day and he'd been so sore he could barely move. The next day had been even worse and the next after that worst of all, but eventually he'd gotten used to it. Now he could finish them all within two hours and barely a twinge in his muscles. He was curious about how good he could be at sports with his newfound stamina and strength. Would they even let someone like him join a team?

He mulled it over and tried to remember everything Richie had explained to him while his hands automatically chucked crap then threw new straw back into pens with an old, worn pitchfork. By the time he was finished he could see the sky's blackness lightening to a dusky blue and there was a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. There may be a lot of people who would claim it was a disgusting, dirty job, but he found it satisfying. It was just simple, honest work. Everything was clean for when his mom had to herd the cows back in for the day's first milking.

That done, he did his rounds to feed the other animals (chickens, ducks, pigs, turkeys), and finally ended up in the hayloft to chuck a few bales down for his mom to feed to calves. He had just thrown the first one down and was in the midst of hauling the second to the hay hole when a loud, distressed mew interrupted him. He blinked in shock at the cat giving him the dirtiest look he'd ever seen, then slowly lowered the bale in his hands back down to settle it gently beside the cat who'd been resting against it.

"Sorry, Mitzi, didn't know you were there," Mike laughed, and at the sound of his laugh the fur ruffled along the cat's neck flattened out. She began to purr as he came around the bale and crouched down to stroke her head. She was one of the first strays that had been dropped at the farm. She'd been a kitten when he'd found her and he'd bundled her up and managed to hide her for nearly a week before his mom found out. Now *that* had been a conversation. She'd been a scrawny little thing then but lately she'd begun to fatten up, to the point that—

"Hey," Mike said suddenly, hand stilling on her head. She made a sound of protest at his ceasing to pet her but he was too shocked to notice. She was *skinny*. He'd been so wrapped up with school he hadn't bothered to do the usual checks he did when cats got fat. "Mitzi, did you—"

The cat got up in annoyance, tail twitching, and Mike followed her as she slid between two bales of hay and padded to the far wall of the hayloft. When she settled back down on her side again, all he could do was stare in dumbfounded amazement. A squirming mass of tiny furballs had rolled out of the hay and were climbing over each other with squeaky mews to tumble into Mitzi's flank. There were at least

five in the mess, probably six. Mike couldn't stop the huge grin from breaking out across his features as his cat started to lick at whatever kittens she could reach.

He wanted to go over and check each kitten to make sure it was okay but best practise was waiting at least a week. Instead he gave Mitzi a two fingered salute and resolved to bring some meat scraps out for her after dinner so she could keep her strength up. Now *here* was something to look forward to. He wondered if Richie and Eddie liked kittens. If they didn't like them now, they would after he showed them Mitzi's. He may not have Eddie hanging out with them yet, but his goal was to have the boy in the group by the time the kittens were old enough to pet.

The rest of the morning seemed to fly by as he finished his chores and cooked his mom an early fresh-eggs and bacon breakfast. She was just getting out of bed, drawn by the smell of food, when Mike decided to leave. He was going to catch the bus from now on and he didn't want to be late on the first day.

"Mike, you didn't have to—" she began as Mike scooped up his backpack. He kissed her on the cheek before she could finish.

"Payment for driving me to school yesterday," he reminded her gently, and she let out a long sigh as if he'd done something wrong that she just couldn't bring herself to get mad about. She kept insisting he was going to wear himself out by taking on too much. Like she was one to talk with how hard she had to work to find money to keep them afloat.

"Okay, but sleep in tomorrow, would you? I can do the chores while you're at school."

"Mm," he said noncommittally as he opened the door. "Love you, Mama."

And then he was out the door, running down the long driveway with his backpack bouncing lightly with every step. From what he'd heard, he was one of the few people who lived this far out so he'd be one of the first ones on the bus. Sure enough, when the bus finally pulled up and he got on, there was only one other boy sitting near the back.

Mike picked the seat closest to the front in the hopes that no one would try to mess with him with the bus driver sitting so close.

Settling his knees against the seat and deciding he enjoyed this no seatbelt thing, he watched the countryside pass by and thought about history. Since he'd barely have to do any studying, he wanted to acquaint himself with some of Derry's old papers. The things his father had said on his deathbed were disturbing and Mike somehow felt that there was something even darker than fires lurking in Derry's past. Whatever it was also seemed to lurk in his memory too, and he felt that if he dug enough into books then it would help him dig into his head. He absentmindedly traced the silvery scar on his palm, eyes watching but not seeing as Derry morphed from crop fields to houses.

He missed his father. It was something that would hit him out of the blue every now and then with such force it took his breath away. The questions were all bad too, the ones that every death brought. Would his Daddy go to Hell for killing people during wartime? Was there even a Hell? Would they meet again or had his father ceased to exist?

Mike realized his throat was closing unbidden and he passed a quick hand over his face. He needed to be strong. He hadn't cried since that one time he'd broken down in the hospital hallway near the end, and he wouldn't now on this overused bus with the kids snickering in the back.

"Um," a quiet voice took him out of his thoughts and he turned his attention to it gratefully. "Is this suh-seat taken?"

The kid studying him hesitantly didn't look like the type of person to sit with someone as frowned upon as Mike. He was attractive and had a sort of presence that Mike instantly respected for reasons he couldn't quite put his finger on. This was the kind of person who should be instantly popular, but instead he was glancing nervously down the bus as if someone were about to make fun of him for existing.

"You're Bill Denbrough," Mike breathed, remembering Richie mentioning the stuttering boy a couple of times the previous day with a sort of confused awe. He understood both emotions now, the awe and the confusion. Bill was... important. He didn't know how or why.

He just knew.

“Uh-huh.” Bill bobbed his head up and down awkwardly, fiddling with the bottom of his shirt. “And you’re Muh-Mike Hanlon, r-right?”

“Yeah.” Mike blinked and they stared at each other for a second, Bill looking increasingly concerned until Mike realized he had yet to answer the original question. “Oh! Oh, this seat isn’t taken so you can sit here. Sorry; I got up early and my brain’s still fuzzy.”

“N-not a problem.”

Bill took a seat beside him and offered him a tentative grin as the bus started rolling again. The scar on Mike’s palm tingled and Mike decided that the tingling meant that Bill was supposed to be a part of the group. Bill, Richie, and Eddie so far, though he sensed that there were more to come and that they had something to do with Stan Uris and the people he hated.

“You been going to school in Derry for a while?” Mike asked to try to make polite conversation. He knew Bill by the stutter and he assumed the other kid knew him by his skin; there was no need for more introductions.

“All my life,” Bill answered easily, more comfortable now that he had somewhere to sit. “Middle school wasn’t the best since there were a ton of buh-b-b-bullies, but high school is a little better. F-for me, at least.” The last part added with a sympathetic wince. Mike half shrugged; it would suck if he were alone but he had Richie, and honestly a few good friends made the rest worth it.

“I remember some bullies from when I was middle school age. Henry Bowers, not sure if you—” Mike didn’t need to finish the sentence to know what the answer was. Bill had frozen in his seat and was staring with eyes so haunted they practically leaked ghosts.

(welcome)

“Yeah, Henry. He wuh-was bad in m-middle school. Something h-happened to him, though. He k-k-k... He’s in a mental asylum and his fuh-friends are dead.”

(welcome to the)

“Actually, I think I read about that in the paper. He was always nuts. I remember this one time he chased me down to this creek and...”

(welcome to the losers)

“Beat you up? H-how’d you get away?”

(welcome to the losers’ club, asshole!)

“I don’t remember. It was a while ago.” Mike had the oddest sensation that it had something to do with Richie yelling. Not the phrase that was echoing in his head—no, *that* phrase came later—but he could clearly remember Richie yelling something else in a similar war tone. Did that even make sense? To remember Richie yelling when he’d only known the boy a day? Bill’s quiet stutter gave him a feeling of *déjà vu* as well, enough that a part of him thought that Bill’s stutter was better than it used to be.

“I get that. I have trouble r-remembering things too. There’s this kid in my physics class—Stanley Uris—he hates me and I can’t even r-remember what I did to him. It must’ve been something because he doesn’t suh-seem like the kind of person to hate without reason, but no matter h-how much I thuh-thuh-think I can’t remember why.” Bill’s stutter grew more pronounced as he grew more visibly stressed. Mike patted his shoulder comfortingly and though it should’ve seemed awkward since they were more or less strangers, it felt completely natural. Bill even relaxed with a small nod of thanks.

“If it’s any consolation, I’ve heard he doesn’t like Richie and a couple of other people too. I’ve never met the guy but I kind of feel like I’ll be one of those people. Maybe because I’m Richie’s friend? I dunno. We should start up a club of some kind.” Now Mike was half-laughing and Bill was grinning like a fool as if the idea totally cracked him up.

“Richie’s a loudmouth, you’re new, I stutter, the other kids are probably different as well. I guess we’re losers in Stan’s eyes. We could be a regular ol’ Losers’ Club.”

There was absolutely no way the phrase was a coincidence, nor was it a coincidence that Bill hadn't stuttered once during that entire sentence. In Bill's voice there was a confidence that came from more than dismissing high school bullies or putting up with mocking about stuttering all his life. Bill himself looked a little shell shocked at his own confidence, brows knitting together in confusion, and Mike quickly changed the subject because... because it wasn't time yet. Soon, but not yet.

"Hey, do you like kittens?" was the only thing he could think to ask. Bill's confusion blossomed into a shy smile as he nodded.

"Y-yeah. Do you have some on the farm?"

"Yup. You should drop by some time to check them out. You've got a bike, right?"

Bill's smile grew as the bus began to slow for the last time to deliver them to the school doors. "A-absolutely. Silver, like the horse. You know... hi ho Silver, away!"

The last word was nearly shouted so loud the bus driver glared at them in the mirror and Bill sank down in his seat, face red although smiling all the while. Mike rubbed his upper lip with one finger to hide a smirk as the doors of the bus cracked open. Kids began piling out, shoving each other down the aisle to get out into air that was still fresh without being too chilly, and Mike was almost reluctant to part from his new companion.

"Come to the farm a week from now after school. They're too new to play with yet but when they're old enough I want them to meet as many people as possible to get them used to humans." Mike stood, stretching as the last few people filtered off the bus. Bill stood too, eyes sparkling in anticipation.

"I'll be there. And, uh... Would y-you mind if I sat w-with you from now on? It's just, I usually suh-sit in the front and there aren't many open seats."

"Of course!" Mike said in surprise, shocked that Bill had even had to ask. Somehow the vague impression of Bill in his mind was that the

stuttering boy automatically knew that Mike would have his back. “If you ever need a place to sit at lunch, our table is always open too. It can be the table for the Losers’ Club to figure out a way to get Stan to stop ignoring us.”

“Thanks. I have a puh-project to work on during lunch r-right now but after that I’d love too. It would be nice to g-get Stan to stop hating us too. I don’t think h-he’s a bad guy. I can’t e-explain it, but I think he nuh-needs a friend. I just feel like he’s going through a rough time.”

Mike nodded in agreement despite never had met said boy. Or at least, not that he could remember. With a murmured goodbye that to Mike sounded almost as reluctant as he himself was feeling, Bill loped off the bus and then got lost in the crowd so that Mike was once again left to face walking into school alone. Ah well. He’d see Richie soon enough.

Except Richie wasn’t the first person he saw as he was making his way up the front steps. His eyes were drawn by movement against the school brick to the right of the steps and he paused outside the door, earning himself a few curses as people bumped into him. He barely noticed. Instead his eyes had narrowed to a squint to confirm that the tiny kid two twelfth graders had backed against a wall was indeed Richie’s favourite germaphobe, Eddie Kaspbrak. Mike’s grip reflexively tightened on the strap of his schoolbag as he turned to fight his way through the tide of students to get back down the steps.

“Hey!” he called as soon as he was free of the swarm. The kids turned as one and for once Mike was dwarfed. They were both massive, one of them nearly a foot taller than Mike and the other one the same height but with shoulders you could sit a boulder on. If this came to a fight, there was absolutely no way for Mike to win even with all the muscles he’d developed from the farm. Mike didn’t even *like* fighting, anyway. He’d much rather talk it out or, if that wasn’t possible, avoid people who liked to brawl. Unfortunately he couldn’t let this slide, especially when he saw the way Eddie was wheezing.

“Kaspbrak? Eddie Kaspbrak, right?” he asked, thinking fast. “The principal is looking for you. Your mom’s here.”

It made absolutely zero sense for the principal to send the new kid out to look for someone but Mike said it with such convincing authority that the guys who'd backed Eddie into a corner spat at the smaller boy's feet in annoyance and walked away. Mike watched them go and finally turned back to Eddie when they were gone, relaxing only when he saw the boy jam an inhaler between his teeth and give himself a few quick breaths.

"You alright?" Mike asked sympathetically as Eddie crouched over, setting his hands on his knees like he was focusing on breathing. "What'd those jerks want with you?"

"The usual," Eddie half snarled, half gasped, though his anger was clearly with the bullies rather than Mike. "They're idiots who need to push around smaller kids to get their kicks. Call me names that usually involve me being gay somehow because in their minds it's the worst insult they can come up with. I don't give a shit about the names. I just wish they didn't need to get physical to prove their masculinity or whatever dumbass notions they've got about how they're supposed to treat shorter kids."

"That's their type, isn't it? If I had to guess, I'd say they're on the school football team too. Stereotypical high school jocks with too much testosterone and a lot to prove."

"Right and right," Eddie muttered as he stuffed his inhaler back into a fanny pack at his hip. "We'll see who's laughing when I'm a successful adult, though. Those jerks are bound to get some sort of infection on the field and die painfully coughing up poisoned blood. But that's later. For now, did you say my *mom* was here?"

Mike read fear in the stiffness of Eddie's pose, one that he wasn't sure the boy even realized was there, and he quickly shook his head.

"No way," Mike assured, watching curiously as Eddie's entire countenance shifted to more comfortable. "I only said that to get them off your back."

"That's—huh. Thanks. You didn't... Richie didn't..."

Mike watched with a certain amusement as Eddie tripped over the

words, seeming to grow angrier at himself the longer he thought about it. There was a faint hint of pink creeping up his neck and he looked for all the world like a feisty tabby trying to spit a fur ball.

“I don’t think Richie would want to see you bullied, either,” Mike finally said kindly to put Eddie out of his misery. “Yesterday he told me you were adorable.” Mike wasn’t usually one to get involved in relationships but it seemed this one needed a little nudging in the right direction. His intuition was clearly right as Eddie stared at him with those large, doe eyes in shock and the pink quickly became red.

“Adorable? What an asshole. I seriously hate him. Tell him I said that. Or, no, wait, don’t tell him that. Tell him—”

“Come sit with us and you can tell him yourself,” Mike suggested with as serious a face as he could maintain. “I think he’d like that.”

“Well, I... I have to meet with my anti-smoking group today. And I don’t even *want* to sit with him! But if you think I should, I guess I could come tomorrow in payment for helping me out today. You’re nice enough that I think I could stand sitting near him if you’re there.”

“Tomorrow then,” Mike agreed. He stretched out a hand and Eddie frowned at it distastefully, then let out a long sigh and reached out to shake on it. It was then that Mike noticed the faintest line of a pink scar on Eddie’s hand. His forehead pulsed like a wicked headache was about to begin there as they shook, and when they let go Eddie looked a little pale.

“I’d better go,” the smaller boy said, hand fluttering towards his head in confusion and then back down again. “Yeah, tomorrow. Thanks, Mike.”

Then he was slipping away without any real explanation of what exactly he was thanking Mike for. But Mike knew well enough.

Mike sat on the news for as long as he could so Richie wouldn’t freak out and disrupt class. When they’d met up at Richie’s locker Mike had

been sort of nervous, though he'd never admit his doubt to anyone. But Richie had yelled happily and thrown an arm around his neck like they'd been friends for the past ten years, cementing their friendship as something that would never change.

"Oh man, the new girl is cool," Richie chatted as they made their way to class. Mike arched a brow, wondering if maybe he'd overestimated Richie's feelings for Eddie and made a mistake. "She let me bum three smokes off of her without complaint. Do I smell friendship or do I smell friendship? Is it cool if I invite her to sit with us next time I talk to her?"

"Absolutely," Mike said with a hint of relief. "I actually invited a couple of other people to sit with us and they said they'd drop by within the next couple of days."

Richie paused, narrowing his eyes at Mike as if trying to decide whether he was joking. "Who?"

"Tell you at lunch."

"Fuck no. Who? Mike, *who*?"

"You sound like an owl," Mike teased and Richie rolled his eyes back into his head and mimed choking himself. The next two periods were basically spent with Richie probing him and him doing everything he could to resist telling. On their way to the cafeteria he paused at the bulletin board to look over the signup sheets while Richie tried to practically drag him into the room where he'd promised to tell which two of their classmates he'd invited to sit with them.

"Library club," he mused to himself, thinking about how much of Derry's history the library would have. There was only one other name on the sheet, another name that made the scar on his palm flare up. With barely any hesitation, he grabbed the pen dangling by a string on the board and scribbled his name under one Ben Hanscom's. Then, with a long moment of hesitation, he also added his name to football tryouts. He doubted he'd make the team but you'd never get anywhere in life if you didn't at least *try* for something you wanted.

“Come on, come on,” Richie urged and he finally allowed himself to be dragged to their table. He barely had time to sit down before Richie was practically climbing on the table to get right into his face and demand to know who. Mike chuckled, rolling his eyes.

“Alright, alright. Bill Denbrough—”

“Stuttering Bill? Seriously? Wicked; he’s a right ol’ chap, he is.”

“—and Eddie Kaspbrak.”

Richie went uncharacteristically quiet, reaching up to rub his eyes behind his glasses in disbelief. He opened his mouth, shut it, glanced around to see who was in the cafeteria, then leaned forward so he was basically prone across the table.

“Eds? What kind of motherfucking sorcery do you have?” he hissed, resting both hands on Mike’s shoulder. “Teach me your secrets, oh wise one. You’ve been here for all of a day and a half and you’ve gotten further than I have in three years.” Richie grinned like he was joking, then suddenly tightened his hands a bit, chewing on his lower lip. “No, seriously, what should I do? Oh my god, what the fuck should I *do*? What if I annoy him and he doesn’t sit with us? What if I dig myself into a deeper hole? We both know I can’t keep my mouth shut and I’ll end up insulting him, so—”

“Richie.” Mike kept his voice soothing, reaching up to put comforting hands on Richie’s arms. “It’s going to be fine. Just be yourself. He may be small but he’s more than capable of dealing with your trashmouth. I really don’t think you’ll scare him away.”

“Hoookay. Hooboy,” Richie breathed as he released Mike and sat down, leg jerking up and down like he couldn’t afford to be still for a second. “If I take it too far, kick me under the table.”

“I’m not kicking you.”

“This is *important*.”

“Richie, I’m not kicking you. Listen, I have some newborn kittens at the farm and I want you all to come play with them when they’re old enough so they get used to people. If you think you’re getting into a

danger zone, use the invitation as an excuse to change the subject. And relax, okay? You're a good guy and I'm sure Eddie will see that."

"If you say so," Richie muttered doubtfully, then brightened a bit. "Did you say kittens?"

The rest of lunch was spent planning the trip to see the kittens, Richie practically bursting out of his skin in excitement. Even Mike grew more excited as he thought about bringing some boys down to the farm. His mom would be so happy to see that he was making real friends who wanted to hang out after school; hopefully it would reduce her stress load a bit.

When the lunch bell rang it was back to the grind, digging right into the meat of the work and banging out some reflective journals for English. The day would've crawled by at a snail's pace if it weren't for Richie's constant jokes and Mike's curiosity when Stan Uris was transferred into his fourth period Biology. Mike watched Stan nearly the entire class, watched him sharpen pencils until their tips were perfect, line them up in military-neat rows, and pick tiny, gummy pieces of stray eraser from their tops. Stan must've felt eyes on him yet he never once looked around, content to reorganize his binder six times. When the bell rang Stan was gone before Mike could get out of his seat, which was a shame because Mike had wanted to talk to him. Introduce himself at the very least, since he sensed this kid was yet another piece in the puzzle he was blindly piecing together.

His search at the bus-loading zone was also futile and eventually he was forced to say goodbye to Richie and hop on the bus home. He had a grand chat with Bill about life on a farm versus life in the suburbs where Bill hardly stuttered once, and then back to the country as the bus slowly emptied. So much had happened during the few hours he'd been in school that his head swam with it as he dropped his schoolbag off and went to water the gardens.

He was still in a kind of daze during dinner but that was alright because his mom had to take her supper to her office while she worked on the bills. Usually she'd come out and help him with chores as soon as supper was over, and he figured she was planning to do that despite looking absolutely drained. So he finished supper as quickly as possible, cleaned up, grabbed a couple of pieces of meat

for Mitzi, and went out to do as much as he could before she was done.

His body wasn't entirely pleased with the hard pace he set out, especially since he'd gotten up a couple of hours earlier than usual. His hands cracked and bled a bit even though they were full of callouses, and he tweaked his back so bad at one point that he had to kneel down and focus on breathing for five minutes before he could even get up. *Daddy could finish this*, he told himself grimly as he got up and hobbled along to the hayloft. He'd feed Mitzi first to give his back a little rest. After that he would chop the wood. Yeah, he should be alright by then.

The old wooden ladder creaked as he eased his way up, back spasming painfully every time he stretched up a hand. By the time he got to the top of the (relatively short) climb he was soaked in sweat and trembling with exertion. Not good at all, and he didn't need to give his mama medical bills on top of everything else she was dealing with.

"You got this," he told himself quietly a few times, hauling his body into a standing position and limping towards the back of the hayloft. He was so focused on putting one foot in front of the other that he didn't notice her until he was nearly a foot from her. When he finally did he was so shocked that he almost forgot his back pain entirely, taking a step back as his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Wh..." He wasn't even sure what question it was that he was about to ask; his mind was so blank not a single word could get through it.

Because crouched against the wall of the hayloft, Mitzi and kittens languishing on her lap, was a bruised girl glaring at him with the same look every abused stray that had wandered onto his farm first gave him. And though his conscious still couldn't come up with a single word, apparently his subconscious recognized the orange shock of hair arrayed on the girl's head in a fashion so messy she must've ran her hands through it a hundred times.

"Bev?"